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JOURNALISM AT THE MOVIES

Brian McNair

Welcome to the first of what will be a regular review essay on films about journalism, covering recent releases as well as looking back at established classics and under-rated obscurities. And there is plenty to write about. Since 2008, and the end of the research period which informed my 2010 book on Journalists in Film there has been a steady stream of films in which a journalist is a primary character, and in which the nature and functioning of journalism is a theme. *Morning Glory* (Roger Michell, 2010), the story of a “serious” news man (Harrison Ford) having to adapt to the infotainment environment of breakfast news, came out early in 2011 in the United Kingdom. The well-received UK indie *Monsters* (Gareth Edwards, 2010), a sci-fi with a journalist at its heart, was released in 2010. In *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009) Robert Downey Jr played a feature journalist who befriends a mentally ill street musician and seeks to rescue him through his writing. Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy has produced three Swedish films, all of them focused on the campaigning journalist Mikael Blomkvist. The first of these is being remade by Hollywood as of this writing.

Film-makers’ fascination with the fourth estate goes back to the earliest days of cinema, and has produced some of the greatest works of cinematic art. From screwball classics such as *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) to contemporary dramas such as *Shattered Glass* and *A Mighty Heart*, through the masterpieces of Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*, 1940), Billy Wilder (*Ace in the Hole*, 1951) and Alexander Mackendrick (*Sweet Smell of Success*, 1957), the journalistic profession has inspired the best cinematic talent to do their best work.

This is a significant fact, and one that requires further investigation (to adapt Burt Lancaster's monstrous JJ Hunsecker's sinister phrase in *Sweet Smell of Success*). Films about university lecturers are thin on the ground, and rarely attract the likes of George Clooney, Richard Gere or Angelina Jolie. Films about accountants and bankers don't constitute a genre (or series of genres, because films about journalism have taken the form of musicals, thrillers, biopics, westerns, horror, sci-fi, and war films, to name but seven recognised genres) comprising more than 2000 titles, according to Richard Ness' wonderful filmography of all the films made about journalism since the days of the silent movies. Of all the professions, indeed, only policemen and detectives occupy a comparably central place in the film-makers' field of vision.

And indeed there is a clue in that comparison. There is a similarity between the two groups, in that both are socially and legally licensed pursuers of the truth, investigators of villainy, guardians of the morally upright and law-abiding majority against corruption and crime. What the policeman or woman does armed with a uniform and a badge, perhaps a gun, the journalist does with no more protection than the weight of democratic tradition. The journalist, since the English revolution, is the personification of a fourth estate exercising critical scrutiny over the powerful and those in authority. He or she goes where the average citizen dare not, reporting back on the abuses of power. The journalist routinely pursues power, threatens it, and often meets resistance, which generates the very essence of narrative*conflict, tension and drama. The film about Wikileaks and Julian Assange when it comes (and it will) will exemplify these qualities.

Films of this type tend to type portray journalists as heroes, which is nice for the practitioner at a time when the profession is in a crisis of trust caused by everything from faking (Stephen Glass at the New Republic, portrayed in the excellent *Shattered Glass*; Billy Ray, 2003) to phone-tapping and other illegal techniques (for a very watchable treatment

of this theme see Mary McGuckian's cruelly underrated study of a UK red-top tabloid, *Rag Tale* [2004]). There are, of course, also films in which journalists are villains, found wanting in their privileged role as watchdogs and guardians of democracy. Interestingly, and again welcome to the practitioner, my research for *Journalists in Film* found that some 80 per cent of portrayals of journalists in the decade up to 2008 were heroic rather than villainous, suggesting a public appetite for decency and honour in the profession, a longing for a journalism that can be admired and defended.

While the quantity and aesthetic quality of films about journalism indicate the recognised importance of the profession in democratic societies, they also provide an important source of data about how journalists are perceived, for better or worse, and what it is we (or the directors, actors, writers who make the films we choose to watch) expect them to be. They are also, for these reasons, a valuable teaching tool for students of journalism in our universities and colleges. Want to discuss the limits of objectivity in the war on terror? Watch Angelina Jolie as Marianne Pearl in *A Mighty Heart* (Michael Winterbottom, 2006). Curious as to how a boyish Stephen Glass could have fabricated at least 40 major feature articles for the esteemed *New Republic**“in-flight magazine of Air Force One”, as the film calls it*see Billy Ray's *Shattered Glass*. Concerned about the performance of the US news media in the invasion of Iraq? George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* rehearses the issues expertly, and entertainingly, by showing us the pressures under which NBC journalists laboured during the Cold War.

Future articles in this series will address particular films, or groups of films.

Meantime, I present the findings of some recent research into which films those who practise journalism, and those who research and teach it, find to be the most rewarding and valuable.

The Best Films About Journalism, Ever!

While writing *Journalists in Film* I sent a questionnaire to journalists and academics in the field, asking them to nominate up to five of their favourite films about journalism. They were asked to explain their choices in up to 150 words per film, and to indicate their professional status. It seemed interesting to consider how the films nominated by practising journalists would compare with those of the academics who study and teach journalism. Would the scholars' more analytical, reflective, critical agenda produce different choices than the practitioners, for whom self-image and esteem might presumably influence their perception of a particular film? On what grounds would these distinct, though frequently overlapping groups*because many journalists work part-or full-time in the academy as lecturers and researchers, while some academics, including this author, write for the news media on a regular basis*define their favourite films about journalism?

The questionnaires were distributed to journalists by email, and also through online academic lists such as that run from Brussels by Nico Carpentier and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ecrea@listserv.vub.ac.be). Columnist, former editor and blogger Roy Greenslade, having received the questionnaire by email, publicised the survey and invited his readers to respond.

Including those who answered Greenslade's blog item, a total of 100 people submitted suggestions for the best films about journalism ever made, though not all suggested five, nor explained their choices in the format requested. The survey was not systematic, therefore, and the findings are not in any sense scientific. I claim no statistical significance for them, and present them as indicative rather than representative in the proper methodological sense. With that qualification, here in descending order are the films mentioned most frequently by respondents to the survey.

1. All the President's Men (Alan J. Pakula, 1976)

Top of the chart was All the President's Men. More than three decades after its release it retains its appeal as a film which depicts (and in depicting, advocates) the very best that journalism can be, even to those like blogger Bezgirl who (presumably) do not remember the Watergate era. For her, it stands out as a film about "how important and influential journalism" is. In an era when it is perceived that investigative journalism is at risk from economic pressures on media managers Pakula's film continues to nag at the collective conscience of liberal democratic societies, and to remind its citizens of what journalism is for. It represents an example to follow, a model of best practice for today's journalists to emulate. Thorbjorn Brodasson of the University of Iceland argues that the film "made a contribution that is hard to measure towards increased understanding of the importance of mass communication for democracy". Steven Barnett at Westminster considers it "still the most effective advertisement for investigative journalism in history". The editor of the British Journalism Review, Bill Hagerty, argues that "the film is testament to the power of the press when good reporters are given the resources and the time to dig up corruption, even at the highest level". In the view of Bob Franklin at Cardiff:

The film represents a high water mark of optimism about journalism and its democratic potential. It shows journalism as a crusading, revelatory and investigative activity which is not compromised by political and economic power.

It is also recognised as a great work of cinematic art. Blogger Soccerchef wrote that "any film that can make comprehensible the events that eventually brought about the downfall of a President in roughly two and a half hours deserves to be recognised as one of the greatest pieces of scriptwriting EVER"! He adds: "the atmosphere of the newsroom is brilliantly conveyed, not only by the set design but by the cinematography. A dated

piece now for sure, no computers, carbon paper everywhere, an obsession with getting the story right, and goodness, people smoking indoors!” Its datedness is of course a large part of its continuing appeal. The film stands as a nostalgic record of what newsrooms used to look like in the days before computers, Internet and mobile phones transformed the journalist’s working environment.

2. His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, 1940)

At number two is His Girl Friday, Howard Hawks’ 1940 adaptation of the 1921 stage play The Front Page, starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell as duelling ex-colleagues (and former married couple). Other versions of The Front Page appear on the list (see below), but Hawks’ is the most highly regarded by respondents to this survey. For blogger Bellafrisco, “it depicts journalism as a fun brawl that attracts high-adrenaline types”. It’s a celebration of arguably the best part of being a journalist*the camaraderie, the rapid-fire wit, dark humour, and sense of shared purpose that ultimately proves irresistible for the heroine. But the film also touches on the darker side of journalism. The journalists depicted, even the heroine, are callous about the plight of the man on death row. Tony Harcup values it because “journalism movies don’t come any funnier than this, and there are even a few ethical insights lobbed in as well*what more could you want”. Former journalist and now PR man Jack Irvine praised “the razor sharp repartee of the two stars”. Many of the great screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s had journalistic plots, and His Girl Friday lays claim to be the greatest.

3. The Paper (Ron Howard, 1994), Ace in the Hole (Billy Wilder, 1951)

The number three place was occupied by two films, Billy Wilder’s Ace in the Hole and Ron Howard’s The Paper. The latter, like His Girl Friday, is revered by journalists for its dynamism and realism in the depiction of the professional journalistic environment, as well as its dialogue and performances. Jairo Lugo describes the film as “one of the finest

showing the daily routines in a newspaper. In creating a parallel narrative with child birth, it produces a sense of tension only describable by those of us who have worked in a daily paper”. Simon Barker regards it as one of the best depictions of the adrenalin and addiction of working in a busy big-city newsroom. The morning conference scene is eerily recognisable and, for once, the front page looks like a real front page, not one of those efforts usually supplied by someone from the graphics department who’ve never laid out a news page in their life. The paranoia and office politics should be second nature to many working in today’s Fleet Street.

Ace in the Hole, Billy Wilder’s 1951 satire (also known as The Big Carnival in the United States) is valued for its “mirror image” contrast to the image of journalism presented in All the President’s Men. If the latter represents journalistic best practice, Ace in the Hole is recognised as a still-powerful portrayal of the worst that journalism can be. Myriam Redondo thinks it “perfectly explains why many people hate reporters”. For another respondent, Chuck Tatum (Kirk Douglas) is “cynical, concerned with the story at any cost, intervening to develop the story rather than simply observing and reporting events. The lead character is fatally flawed ...untrustworthy and essentially unlikeable”. Journalist John Lloyd remarks that “even if it’s a desperately bitter film, it does catch the temptation which besets all journalists: to so doctor the story that it fits an idea of a popular drama, not the twists of real life. And the figure of the small town paper on which Kirk Douglas winds up is every reporter’s stern father”.

4. Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941), Good Night, and Good Luck

(George Clooney, 2005)

Two titles shared fourth position. Citizen Kane needs no introduction, since it has been a recognised classic of cinema for decades. As a study of media power, and how power can corrupt the normative ideals which guide liberal journalism, it is as relevant today as it was in the era of William Randolph Hearst. Steven Barnett notes how

astonishing it is that “after all this time neither the themes nor the story line feels dated”.

Charles Lambert at the University of Central Lancashire feels that “it cannot be bettered in capturing the era when journalism became a business”.

George Clooney’s 2005 film shares with Welles’ master work its monochrome cinematography, and is widely praised for its attention to period detail, its script and its acting performances. David Hutchison of Glasgow Caledonian University observes how accurately the film evokes the studio atmosphere of the NBC See It Now current affairs programme, and notes that actor David Strathairn’s “mimetic rendering” of Ed Murrow’s character, “down to his mannerisms and constant cigarettes, is compelling”. Steven Barnett describes it as “a good example of the collision of politics and journalism superbly caught on screen and a reminder to posterity of the impact which individual journalists can have on a nation’s mood”.

5. The Front Page (Billy Wilder, 1974)

More than two decades after *Ace in the Hole*, Wilder returned to the subject of journalism with this adaptation of the Hecht-MacArthur play, viewed by several respondents as superior to Hawks’ gender-reversal version. Those who cite it identified its script and performances by Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau. For one respondent this is “by far the best version of the original stage play and a reminder for the golden age-ists of quite how squalid journalism could be”.

The Best of the Rest

Sixteen films shared the remaining five places in this “best of” list. Val Guest’s *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961) came in at number 6 and was noted by several UK respondents for its authentic representation of a Fleet Street newsroom in the late 1950s/early 1960s. Alexander MacKendrick’s *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) with its “odious

characters” and “lacerating” dialogue appears at number seven. Among more recent releases included in the list were *Shattered Glass* (Billy Ray, 2003), *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) and *Almost Famous* (Cameron Crowe, 1998).

As noted, this survey was intended to show if journalists’ views on what make a good movie about journalism were substantially different from those of the academics. The short answer is*no, on the basis of this admittedly small sample, they are not. All the *President’s Men* features regularly in journalists’ top fives, not surprising given its mythical status. Academics also regularly list it, alongside contemporary equivalents such as *Good Night*, and *Good Luck*, suggesting a demand amongst both practitioners and theoreticians and contextualists for films which strive to accentuate the democratic importance of journalism and the courage of the journalist. We like it when film-makers represent journalists positively, it seems, which may be good news for a profession suffering from a decline in trust and public esteem.

Journalists particularly value films like *The Front Page*, *Broadcast News* and *The Paper*, for their realism and authenticity in capturing the working environment. Academics, with a nod to film studies, mention *Citizen Kane* a lot, and responses from overseas list films such as the Turkish *Babam ve Oglum* [Father and Son]. British Journalism Review editor Bill Hagerty and Steven Barnett at Westminster bravely listed *The Devil Wears Prada*, a film which dares to take fashion journalism seriously. And why not? As Barnett observes, the shoes are to die for.

Brian’s Top 10

As the organiser of the survey, I will now exercise my god-like powers and list my own selection of the 10 best films about journalism and journalists, ever! In the order of their release, they are:

***His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940)**

Most of the reasons for my selection of this film as one of the greatest ever made about journalism are given above, and require little repetition here. In addition to the dynamism and wit with which Wilder and his crew render the late 1930s tabloid newsroom, however, is the script's frequent engagement with the nature of popular journalism: what its commercially driven values are, and what they should be, as articulated by the duelling figures of Walter and Hildy, respectively. Hildy is the voice of the public interest, defending the normative ideal of liberal journalism, while Walter speaks up for the pragmatics of the news business. In sticking to her guns, Hildy also presents one of the great portrayals of a female journalist operating successfully in what was still very much a man's world. Seventy years after its production Hawks' film still resonates on both of these levels: as a study of the sexual politics of the journalistic profession, and a popular discourse on what journalism should be. The issues it raises about ethics and protection of privacy are never far from the public agenda today, and the film therefore has a timeless quality.

Ace in the Hole (Billy Wilder, 1951)

Similarly, *Ace in the Hole* stands the test of time as a work of cinematic art, its noirish, desert-set story, as compelling today as the year it was made, the writing and performances striking a chord for any reader of popular journalism in the twenty-first century. This, after all, is a film about the capacity of an overly commercialised journalism to manufacture reality, to manipulate and mould events for the purpose not of enlightening or informing citizens, but to sell newspapers, without regard to the people involved. The script identifies and critiques a distorted set of news values which remain very much in place today, and explicitly contrasts the professional dominance of these values with the theoretical ideals promoted by journalism schools. Chuck Tatum stands for the arrogance and amorality of popular journalism at its worst, as college-educated novice Herbie has his beliefs in the nobility of his chosen profession gradually undermined. The contemporary student who wishes to understand the values which drive popular

journalism in the twenty-first century may begin right here, in the Arizona desert of the early 1950s.

Sweet Smell of Success (Alexander MacKendrick, 1957)

As with so many of the films now recognised as “great” in their representation of journalists, MacKendrick’s study of a brutal newspaper columnist was a commercial flop in 1957. Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis both play unrepentant villains, which confused their 1950s fan base. The film was well-reviewed in places, however, and has grown in stature ever since. Today MacKendrick’s direction, the script by Clifford Odets and the dark central performances, as well as the noirish cinematography and soundtrack music, are recognised as contributing to what is widely recognised as an all-time classic of American cinema. As a film about journalism, *Sweet Smell of Success* is distinctive in exploring the phenomenon of the celebrity columnist, or “king-maker”. Inspired by the modus operandi of the real-life journalist Walter Winchell, *Sweet Smell of Success* examines the abuse of media power in terms which still resonate today. Hunsecker’s bullying, including that of a US senator whom he confronts in his favourite club, highlights what happens when the fourth estate becomes over-powerful.

Another feature which singles out this film for special mention is the representation of Tony Curtis’s sleazy press agent, Sydney Falco. Today, of course, public relations has a very different, more powerful place in the media environment. The balance of media power has shifted from journalist to PR practitioner and spin doctor. Falco represents the early days of a communication profession which has since gone on to greater things, to the oft-voiced regret of many observers.

Salvador (Oliver Stone, 1984)

Oliver Stone’s *Salvador* is one of the few films to critically examine the role of the US news media in the central American conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s. Made after Roger Spottiswoode’s *Under Fire* it is, in this writer’s opinion, the better film, conveying as it does the loss of (relative) innocence experienced by freelance reporter Richard Boyle as he

encounters the horrors of war in El Salvador. James Woods' Boyle is convincing both as a gonzo-esque journalist who heads south in search of a story to support his dissolute lifestyle, and then as an awakening witness to US government-supported atrocity. In the process he becomes the voice of principled liberal journalism, set against the complicit bias and blindness of the mainstream US news media. Stone does not spare the details of crimes such as the rape and murder of four US nuns, many of which are based on actual incidents, and the key scene where photographer John Cassady takes Boyle to the place where victims of the death squads are dumped is deeply disturbing. The film avoids neat Hollywood-style resolution, and maintains an appropriate sense of dread throughout. If Noam Chomsky were ever to write a screenplay about the role of the US media as National Security State apparatus, or dramatise his propaganda model for a non-academic audience, the results would conceivably look something like this.

The Accidental Hero (Stephen Frears, 1992)

Stephen Frears' rarely seen study of how modern news media manufacture celebrity was not a critical or commercial success when it was released in 1992, but stands up today as a perceptive satire about the distorting effect of an overly commodified news culture on journalistic values. Like Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the Hole* four decades earlier, Geena Davies' TV news reporter is under pressure to make reality fit the needs of the news commodity, rather than merely report that reality. Unlike Tatum, she rebels in the end against the celebrification of "the Angel of Flight 101", and the way in which the events surrounding an air crash and rescue are mythologised by her producers with exaggerated re-enactments and melodramatic commentaries. The false heroism of one man is inflated (invented, indeed), while that of Dustin Hoffman's reluctant "accidental hero" is dismissed until the very end, when Davies finally unearths his story and redeems herself by ensuring its exposure. As well as being a highly entertaining drama, the script contains profound reflections on the nature of journalism, and the shallowness of mediated reality, as seen through the increasingly disillusioned figure of Davies's prizewinning

reporter who comes to see through the illusion she has been complicit in creating. Her acceptance speech at an awards ceremony deconstructs the manner in which journalism narrativises reality and turns it into a layered “story”, onion-like, with as much insight as will be found in anything by Baudrillard or Eco.

Welcome to Sarajevo (Michael Winterbottom, 1997)

Winterbottom’s fact-based account of the story of ITN foreign correspondent Michael Nicholson, who adopted a Bosnian orphan and brought her home to the United Kingdom with him after his experiences of reporting the siege of Sarajevo, is by some stretch the best film to be made about conflict journalism in the 1990s. Where Salvador portrayed a world of identifiable goodies and baddies and allowed the journalist to take sides on behalf of the audience, Welcome to Sarajevo captures the confusion and chaos of post-communist Europe, when the walls have come down and pre-modern enmities have resurfaced to wreck the lives of ordinary people. Winterbottom and his actors convey the growing weariness and cynicism of journalists who must witness and report on massacres of civilians as they buy bread in a market place, and extreme nationalism of a type not seen since the Second World War.

Shattered Glass (Billy Ray, 2003)

It is a remarkable fact that in a year when Bruce Almighty made nearly \$500 million at the global box office, Shattered Glass attracted less than \$3 million. Jim Carrey’s comic vehicle about local TV news journalism has its charms, no doubt, but Shattered Glass will stand the test of time as the more interesting and important film. As an account of the 1998 fabrication scandal involving Stephen Glass and the leading US periodical New Republic, it marks the moment when the authority and public trust in print journalism began to be undermined by the rise of digital media. To the student of journalism this film marks the moment when the tide turned*there had always been liars and cheats in journalism; now, for the first time, the rising upstarts of the online world were on to them.

The film's value as media history is reinforced by skilled performances from Peter Skarsgaard as editor Chuck Lane, and from Hayden Christensen as Glass. The editorial offices are authentically rendered, and the script loaded with insights into the nature of journalism, and the standards by which objectivity is maintained in a prestigious US outlet of record (even if these are often mouthed by the man who is systematically violating them). The film dramatises the rigorous editorial procedures adopted by the New Republic, but never in a manner which bores. Rather, the deviant practices of one toxic individual in an otherwise honourable organisation become the stuff of gripping drama.

Rag Tale (Mary McGuckian, 2004)

One of the most poorly received journalism films of all time, Rag Tale is an underrated satire about the state of popular journalism in early twenty-first-century Britain. Most of the critics condemned its hyperactive cinematography (which is trying at times, and the film's main flaw), and accused the script of lacking credibility. But any observer of UK popular journalism in the last two or three decades will think that this story of illicit sex in the office, drug abuse, and politically motivated anti-monarchy campaigns is quite believable. As is the brutal, macho atmosphere of the editorial committee meetings in which stories are evaluated for their potential appeal to the Rag's readers. The scene where a potentially serious foreign story about Afghanistan is transformed into human-interest fluff for the benefit of readers who couldn't find that country on a map is as funny as it is frightening. Rag Tale is, despite the criticism it received from a profession who may have thought its satirical assault too close for comfort, simply the best film ever made about the excesses of red-top (what used to be known as "tabloid") journalism. Made just before the Madeleine McCann and the Nicholas Mosley cases brought out the very worst of British journalism, the ugly tabloid world rendered by Mary McGuckian looks more cautious and restrained with every new press scandal.

Good Night, and Good Luck (George Clooney, 2005)

Where Rag Tale was roundly panned by its media critics, Clooney's homage to Ed

Murrow and NBC's current affairs golden age was greeted with a unanimity of critical approval hardly seen since *All the President's Men*. Like Pakula's film (and unlike *Rag Tale*) this is a salute to the best of journalism, made at a time when the post-9/11 political environment was perceived to be putting US journalists under intense pressure to conform to an ascendant right-wing consensus. George W. Bush has gone and the film's key message about the perils of commercialisation, as articulated in key speeches by Murrow (David Strathairn) which top and tail the script, seems overly simplistic when set against the sheer diversity and dynamism of US media culture in the 2000s.

Nevertheless, the message is presented with great skill, and the film is as visually appealing as it is packed with comment and insight into the role of the journalist.

Monochrome cinematography and a cool jazz soundtrack remind one of *Sweet Smell of Success*, while the unremitting goodness of the journalists has not been seen in a movie since *All the President's Men*. Period details such as the chain smoking which accompanies nearly every scene encourage nostalgia for the era when newsrooms, and journalists, were a little less health and safety conscious than today. A film which deserved its critical and commercial success, and will retain its value as a positive model to students of journalism.

A Mighty Heart (Michael Winterbottom, 2006)

The second of Winterbottom's films to appear in my personal top 10, this account of the kidnapping and execution of Newsweek journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan is remarkable for its reconciliation of the emotional dimension of the story (as played out by Angelina Jolie's Marianne Pearl) with the ethical and professional questions raised by Pearl's choices on that fateful assignment. These contrasting themes are approached without judgement or moralising, in a manner which commands respect for the journalist and his wife (also a journalist, but reduced here to a spectator in a diplomatic drama), while also questioning their responses as professionals at various stages in their ordeal. In addition, Winterbottom's portrayal of his Pakistani locations, and the jihadi who take Pearl

hostage, avoids the cliches of comparable films such as *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007).

We see the chaos of Karachi, but also come to understand at least a little of its way of life.

A film which, more than any other in recent times, commands respect for the heroism and nobility of a journalistic profession struggling to perform its traditional functions in a world where the old rules no longer apply.

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